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ABSTRACT

The municipal early childhood program in Reggio Emilia, Italy, one of the most renowned examples of community-supported child care systems in the Western world, is described. A brief historical overview is followed by discussion of such aspects of the Reggio Emilia project as the high level of exchange between families and schools, the predominance of aesthetic considerations throughout the schools, and the importance of the physical environment and use of classroom space in meeting curriculum goals. It is concluded that even though many features of the Reggio Emilia program reflect Italian cultural values and may be inappropriate for child care settings outside Italy, some aspects of the program are worth emulating. These include: (1) the emphasis on the positive value of multiple points of view and reciprocal participation in the family-school relationship; (2) the view that the dialogue between parents and teachers is and should be a complicated matter; (3) the emphases on the arts and aesthetic sensibilities; and (4) the significance of the environment as a provider of opportunities for social exchanges. (RH)

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# EARLY CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION, ITALIAN STYLE: THE REGGIO EMILIA DAYCARE AND PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

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## EARLY CHILD CARE AND EDUCATION, ITALIAN STYLE: THE REGGIO EMILIA DAYCARE AND PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

**Who knows what's best for children - their parents or their teachers? Does good daycare compete with a child's ties to her family? To what extent can child care programs reflect community norms and cultural values?**

For the past 25 years, these questions have been part of on-going discussions between parents, educators, child development specialists and other members of the community of Reggio Emilia, Italy. As a result, Reggio Emilia now has one of the most renown examples of community-supported child care systems in the Western world.

As illustrated by the exhibition (The Hundred Languages of Children) currently traveling throughout the U.S., this municipal early childhood program incorporates high quality daycare (beginning in infancy and continuing through age five) with a carefully articulated philosophy of education which includes a constructivist perspective on child development. In the preschool classrooms, the curriculum exemplifies a thematic or project approach to learning for both children and teachers. Parents and teachers are mutually involved in the observing and evaluation of their children's growth and development.

Before describing the program in greater detail, a brief look at the history of the Reggio Emilia program is necessary to set the context for the discussion. The town of Reggio Emilia is located a short drive north of Bologna,

in the region of Emilia-Romagna. This wealthy northern Italian region of 4 million inhabitants is well known for its high level of agricultural and industrial productivity as well as for its cultural contributions to the history of Italian art and architecture. Child welfare is a major priority of Reggio Emilia's well-subsidized social services (Rankin, 1985). The emphasis on the well-being of children is clearly reflected in the community's response to child care needs of contemporary families following World War II. Well in advance of the 1968 national law that established the funding of public preschools for all 3- to 6-year-old Italian children, parents in the town of Reggio Emilia established the first public preschools. Today, Reggio Emilia has 22 community preschools and 13 infant/toddler centers, serving, respectively, 47% of all 3- to 6-year-old children, and 37% of those up to the age of three.[1]

As a result of a fortuitous set of circumstances - including the continuity of involvement (for many, over 25 years) on the part of a particularly creative and dedicated team of professionals, in combination with continued municipal and regional support (in spite of a constantly

[1] Today, 95% of all preschool aged children in Reggio Emilia attend some form of preschool, while 42% of children under the age of three attend infant/toddler daycare (Center for Educational Research, 1989).

shifting political scene throughout the rest of Italy) -

parents, teachers, and other members of the Reggio Emilia community have worked together to create a unique and exciting preschool and infant/toddler daycare program that challenges notions of potentially adverse effects of out-of-home care for young children.

Numerous aspects of the Reggio Project are intriguing to educators in the U.S., not the least of which is the level of community support for, and involvement with, the provision of quality programs for all children. While we continue to ponder the ways and means of reaching such a level of consensus and support here in the U.S., other features of the Reggio Emilia program may prove more immediately useful in our own efforts to provide high quality early childhood programs. Three such features to be discussed in this article reflect Italian cultural values, yet are also provocative in their implications for improved strategies to meet our own goals: the high level of exchange between families and schools; the predominance of aesthetic considerations throughout the schools; and the importance of the physical environment and the use of classroom space in meeting curriculum goals.

School as a community of exchange. The Reggio Emilia project reflects a long-standing commitment to cooperative and supportive home/school relationships that advocates a partnership rather than an adversarial relationship between parents and teachers. Strategies of separating teachers and parents from one another have been replaced by an advocacy for active participation on the parts not only of families of children enrolled in the program, but community members as well.

Because the isolation of teachers and parents from one another was seen as a hindrance to professional and family development, formal and informal strategies evolved to establish a rich community of exchange. Each school has a Parent-Teacher Board made up of elected representatives of staff, parents, and citizens. The Board, which includes from 13 to 51 members depending on school size, works together on problems specific to their school. One person from each Board is elected for membership to La Consulta, a committee which represents a synthesis of the individual school committees. Included as members of La Consulta are representatives from the Directorial staff, town council and the local Department of Education. This group asserts significant influence over local government decision-making, in addition to presenting school-related concerns.

The home/school partnership is facilitated and reinforced by a shared understanding of the actual role and potential of non-familial child care. Contrary to how it is perceived by many in the U.S., daycare in Reggio Emilia is not seen as an issue of maternal substitution. Teachers acknowledge the critical role of both parents, while emphasizing that the child is also capable, at a very young age, of developing other relationships. Concerns of both parents and teachers are that those relationships be of good quality, with the stability provided by continuity and collaboration. This joint understanding, reached after lengthy discussion between parents and teachers, has been described as instrumental in fostering a positive rather than competitive relationship among these adults. The issue for users and providers of daycare in Reggio Emilia is seen, therefore, as one of <u>how to use other adults and children as resources for the child and the family</u>.[2]

The process of involving parents in the program is initiated as soon as a child is enrolled. Parents are asked to share information about their child, particularly with respect to daily routines and sleeping and eating

[2] Unless specified otherwise, information on the Reggio Emilia program is based on continuing dialogue with teachers and administrators of Reggio Emilia, including but not limited to Loris Malaguzzi, Sergio Spaggiari, and Tiziana Filipini.

preferences. Parents are also urged to stay in the classroom for the first few weeks of school, until the child remains easily without a family member. When the parents leave their children at the school, they are invited to return often. Typically, initial concerns center around whether or not the child is happy, and is eating and sleeping well. However, as parents gain confidence in the teachers' collective ability to care for their child's custodial needs, other types of experiences begin to assume greater importance. Teachers routinely point out highlights of the child's day, and parents soon come to appreciate the fact that the nido [3] provides opportunities for growth and development that complement that of the family.[4] The changing nature of parental concerns contributes to the increased level of involvement that develops as parents and teachers work together. This initiation into the Reggio Emilia program sets the tone for subsequent sustained dialogue among and between parents and

[3] nido means "nest" and is used throughout Italy as a term for daycare.

[4] As a result of the growing awareness that high quality child care can play a vital role in the lives of even very young children, almost 40% of infants and toddlers in the 0-3 age range are enrolled in the Reggio Emilia asilo nidi (infant daycare centers), compared with less than 10% elsewhere in Italy (Tiziana Filipini, personal communication, June 12, 1989).

teachers, with the understanding that no one has a monopoly on what is best for the children.[5]

Besides articulating, at the onset, the strong desire for parental involvement, how else do the Reggio Emilia schools foster this partnership? A number of practices observed during visits to Reggio Emilia serve to reinforce the complementary roles of parents and teachers.

One organizational feature that contributes to the long-term involvement of parents is the practice of keeping the same group of children and teachers together for a three-year period. Those children who begin as infants will remain together throughout the first three years at the asilo nido. Following the third birthday, these children will move into the preschool program, where they will again remain together for a three year period, albeit in different classrooms with different teachers.[6] This practice provides a degree of continuity and familiarity that enables more effective parent/teacher, teacher/child and child/child relationships. Parents also have the opportunity to develop among themselves a large and stable network of families of young children. The strength of

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[5]Sergio Spaggiari, personal communication, June 15, 1987.

[6] Each classroom of children, while varying in number from 12 infants to 25 preschoolers, has two teachers in addition to the school art teacher, the cook, and auxiliary staff.

this network is apparent in the subsequent level of parent cooperation and participation in projects relating to their child's classroom. Field trips, for example, become major social events for the adults as well as the children.[7]

Issues of continuity and familiarity are also dealt with immediately upon enrollment. One strategy used in the infant/toddler classrooms is the creation of individual signs for display over an infant's crib which describe the child's bedtime routine. (Insert photo 1 about here.) This information, provided initially by parents and then supplemented by teachers, enables a vital continuity between home and school and reflects the belief in a collective approach to meeting children's needs.

A sense of shared responsibility for each child's well-being is further reinforced by a simple method of record keeping. Upon entry to a classroom, a special notebook is created for each child. This notebook will eventually be filled with observations, photographs, and anecdotal records provided by family members as well as school personnel. (Insert photo 2 about here.) In addition to

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[7] During a recent visit to Reggio Emilia I was invited to bring my family to join in a field trip with a preschool classroom that was studying outer space. The agenda included a dinner stop at a local pizzeria, followed by a late night visit to the small observatory several miles outside of town. 50 parents, 25 children, 2 classroom teachers, 1 art teacher, the school custodian and the cook participated in the field trip.

noting the attainment of standard developmental milestones, the child's social relationships and creative efforts will be monitored and recorded. When appropriate, examples of children's work are included in the notebook. These notebooks are added to throughout the year, and by the time a child leaves the preschool for formal public schooling, the number of volumes may number as many as three or four. [8]

Other means of communication between school personnel and parents include meetings with the cook to share favorite family and school recipes; and the continuation of school projects at home, even during vacations. The presence of carefully designed posters throughout the school also serves to keep families informed of and interested in school activities. These attractive displays contain descriptions of on-going curriculum and research projects; examples of children's work, including their comments regarding their own efforts; and biographical information about the school staff. **(Insert photo 3 here).**

In fact, the use of visual displays throughout the classrooms, halls, and entrances is one of the most salient

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[8] One teacher noted three distinct purposes of the notebooks: to serve as a method of communication between parents and teachers, to document the child's progress relative to other children, and to provide evidence to the child of the importance attributed to this period of his/her life (Carlina Rinaldi, personal communication, June 13, 1989).

features of the Reggio Emilia schools. Such displays not only serve as forms of communication between parents, teachers, and children, but they reflect another common element of the program: the role of art and aesthetics.

**The importance of art and aesthetics.** Visitors to the Reggio Emilia program are immediately struck by the visually stimulating nature of the preschool and infant/toddler classrooms. While the furnishings are of good quality, what is astonishing about the appearance of the schools and classrooms is not the result of a higher-than-average budget for equipment and furniture. Instead, what one sees includes the work of children (drawings, paintings, sculptures) and their teachers (photographs and displays of on-going projects), often displayed in a manner to convey the process through which children have explored a current problem or project.

There is more to see, however, than evidence of children's thinking. Everywhere you turn, there is something to ponder. Art supplies, including paints and clay as well as recycled or naturally found materials (leaves, bottle caps, fabric scraps, corrugated cardboard) are carefully arranged on shelves within children's reach. Arrangements of found objects, including flower petals and plastic bags filled with "memories" from field trips, are

carefully put on display in a manner which draws attention to the importance a child attributes to the objects, and also to the aesthetic qualities (shape, texture, color) of the objects themselves (Gandini, 1984). This attention to aesthetics extends beyond the classroom walls. Lunchrooms look more like restaurants. Even the menu is a carefully arranged display of color photographic close-ups of the foods to be served that day, inviting children to comment on the shape of the pasta or the color of a vegetable. (Insert photos 4, 5, 6 & 7 here.)

Clearly, art education in Reggio Emilia is more than providing paint and an easel. It includes the creation of opportunities which draw attention to unique aspects of the environment while making the normal of everyday more appealing. The emphasis on aesthetics and the visual arts fosters a genuine art appreciation, and is expanded, through a constructivist curriculum, as a form of exploration as well as expression. An art teacher works along with the classroom teacher on children's various projects, facilitating the integration of the arts into the curriculum (Gandini & Edwards, 1989).

As the children of Reggio Emilia receive an education in visual perception, they experience their cultural heritage as well. There is a strong and obvious continuity

between the visually stimulating classrooms and the presence of aesthetically pleasing imagery (stately rows of cypress trees, the quilt-like patterning of gardens, and careful arrangements of produce) in the surrounding Italian landscape. The potential of the environment to contribute to these and other pedagogical concerns is another distinguishing feature of the program.

"Space is our third teacher."[9] When discussing the issue of space, teachers refer not just to the physical plant, but to the social environment as well. The Reggio Emilia schools have been planned, equipped and arranged to reflect a major program goal: the facilitation of social exchanges among and between adults and children. Each classroom includes a large central area where all children and teachers can meet, smaller work spaces, and a "mini atelier" (small art room) where children can work on long-term projects. Classrooms are equipped with at least one rocking chair as well as other full-scale furniture, thereby making adults feel comfortable while evoking images of home for children.

These concerns for the psychological significance of space are also apparent outside each classroom. Each school has rooms in which parents can meet and families can

[9] Tiziana Filipini, personal communication, June 12, 1989

gather. Classrooms are typically arranged around an open central area, which serves to connect each individual classroom to the entire school. This space, through which adults and children must pass throughout the day, is considered equal in importance to the town piazza. Other parallels to community life are apparent through the use of gardens and courtyards as ways to extend the classroom.

Although many architectural decisions evolved over the years as a result of trial and error, one early decision which has remained in force was to keep bathrooms and the kitchen close to the classrooms. Because of the belief in the importance of daily routines to children, the decision was made to treat the two utility rooms as extensions of the classroom. Kitchens are typically surrounded by glass windows, so that the activities are open to observation throughout the day. Children are frequently invited to participate in the cooking process. (Insert photo 8 here). Bathrooms, seen as important centers of social exchange, are decorated with mobiles, paintings and colorful arrangements of towels and toothbrushes (Insert photo 9 here.) Mirrored-tile arrangements encourage children to perform antics to the amusement of their peers, puzzle over the cognitive task presented by a missing piece, or simply contemplate their growing bodies.

**Conclusion.** As we learn of early childhood priorities and practices in other cultures, we are encouraged to reflect on the values expressed in our own programs for young children (Shigaki, 1983; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson, 1989). As noted previously, many features of Reggio Emilia program reflect Italian cultural values, and as such, may be inappropriate for child care settings outside of Italy. However, as a result of this increased familiarity with another culture, we also have an opportunity - and indeed, an obligation - to consider whether or not some practices might not be equally well-suited to our own needs.

Some aspects of the Reggio Emilia home-school relationship are necessitated by a cultural belief in the predominance of the maternal role regarding the care of the young child; parent/teacher relationships are reminiscent of roles more typically played by the Italian extended family (New, 1988). Yet there are ample theoretical grounds to support the development of cooperative home/ school relations in the U.S. (Powell, 1989), particularly in the early years (Honig, 1975). While U.S. teachers and caregivers frequently bemoan the difficulties inherent in establishing such relations (Kontos & Wells, 1986),teachers in Reggio Emilia not only emphasize the <u>value</u> of multiple points of view and reciprocal participation, but they

describe the process of maintaining a dialogue between parents and teachers as one "which is and should be complicated." (Center for Educational Research, 1989,p.11).

The emphases on the arts and aesthetic sensibilities reflect an appreciation of detail and sensitivity to design that is consistent with the Italian cultural tradition of creative endeavors. Yet the contribution of the arts, within a personally meaningful and intellectually stimulating environment, to developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum is well acknowledged by U.S. educators (Bredekamp, 1987; Hoffman & Lamme, 1989).

The significance of the environment as a provisor of opportunities for social exchanges corresponds to the importance attributed to group participation in Italian discourse, including the cultural routine of discussione (Corsaro, 1988). Yet attention to a classroom's social climate is surely critical in the U.S. as well, if school is to be a place where children and adults can truly become engaged with each other and their work (Bruner, 1985; Slavin, 1987; Katz & Chard, 1989).

The resulting impression conveyed by the Reggio Emilia early childhood program is one of caring, consensus, and continuity. We would do well to emulate such features.

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